THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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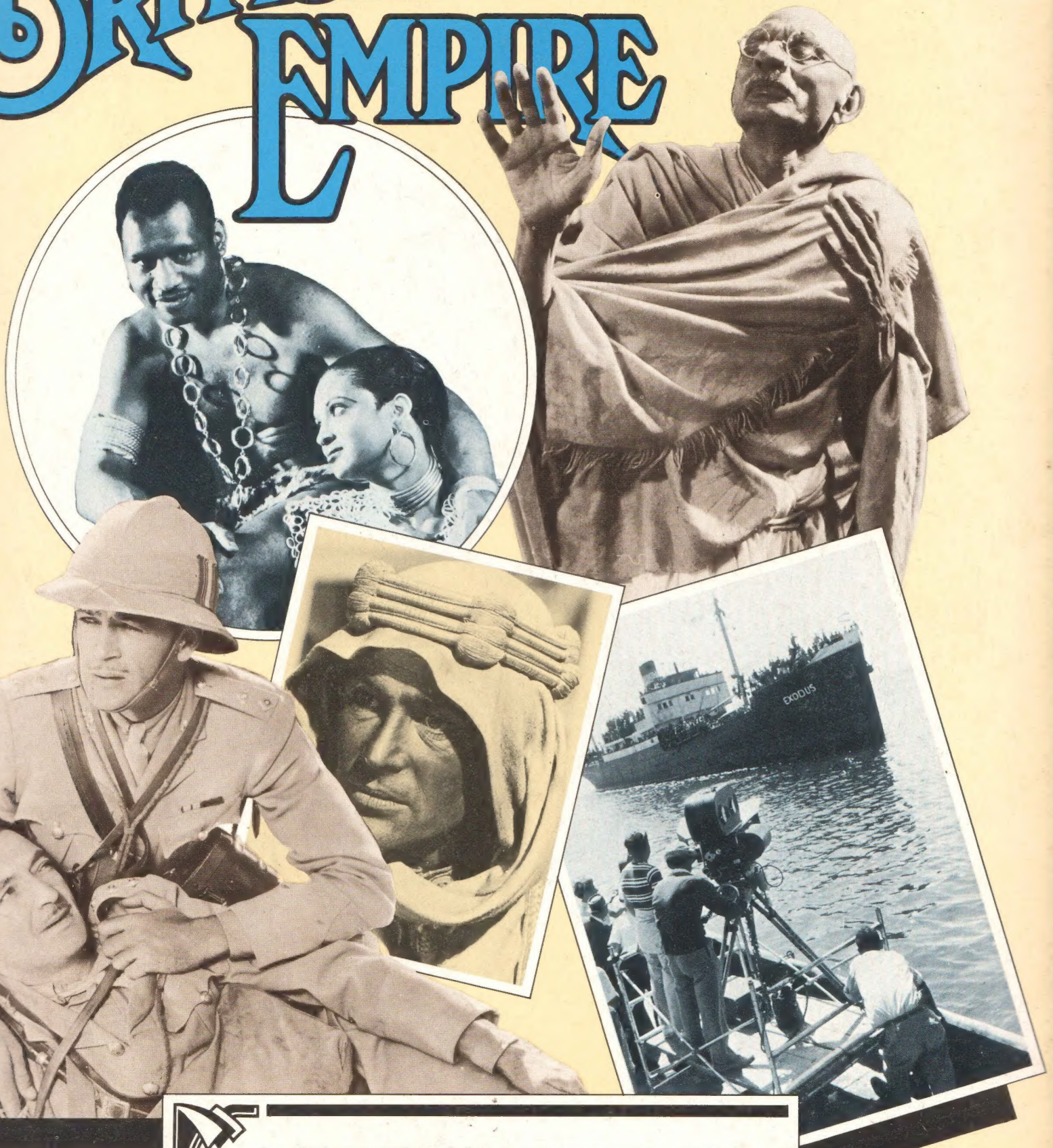

THE EMPIRE ON FILM

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THE BRITISH EMPIRE

BBC tv TIME-LIFE BOOKS 25p
No. 80

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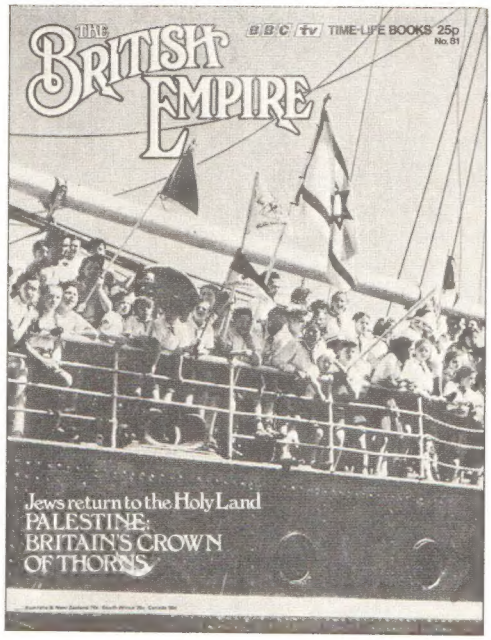


CONTENTS

2213. The Empire on Film
The early days of sound cinema when the Empire was seen as little more than a source of stirring, escapist romances.

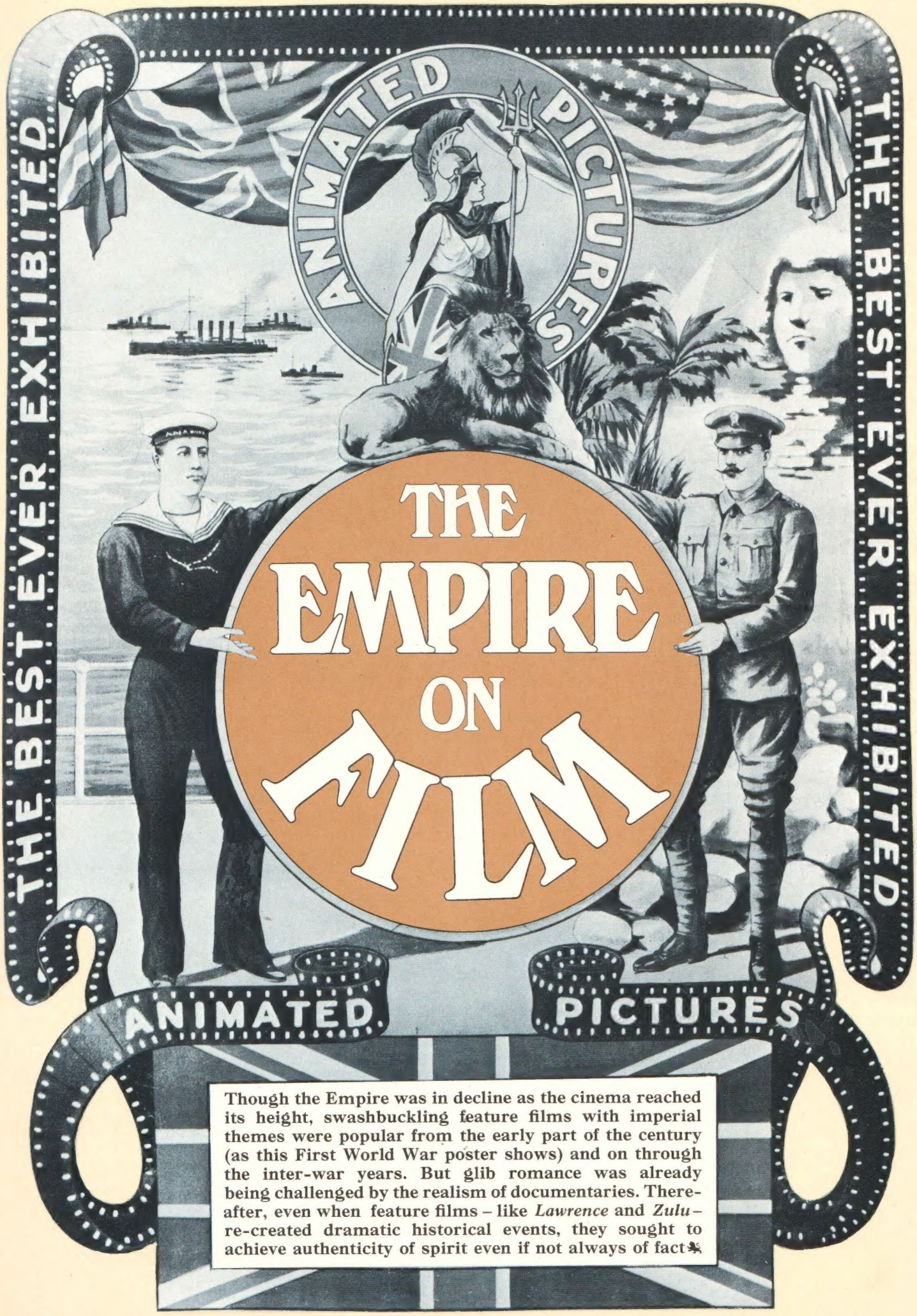
2219. Picture Essay: The Romantic Image
Four inter-war films that gloried in the stories of men facing fearful odds for the honour of King and Country.

2228. Return to Reality
The war brings an increasing interest in real events, and film-makers working in the field bring a new realism to cinema views of the Empire.

2234. Picture Essay: The End of the Raj
Two films – *Bhowani Junction* and *Nine Hours to Rama* – exploit the dramatic events of Indian Independence in 1947.

2238. The Imperial Epic
The big screen gives new life to imperial history, presented outstandingly in *Lawrence* and *Khartoum*.

Cover: A montage of shots shows scenes from: *Sanders of the River* (top left), *Nine Hours to Rama* (top right), *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (bottom left), *Lawrence of Arabia* (centre) and the shooting of *Exodus* (bottom right).



Though the Empire was in decline as the cinema reached its height, swashbuckling feature films with imperial themes were popular from the early part of the century (as this First World War poster shows) and on through the inter-war years. But glib romance was already being challenged by the realism of documentaries. Thereafter, even when feature films – like *Lawrence* and *Zulu* – re-created dramatic historical events, they sought to achieve authenticity of spirit even if not always of fact.

By Roger Manvell

Harry Carey (left), Duncan Renaldo and Edwina Booth (right) hunt in the bush in W.S. Van Dyke's *Trader Horn*, shot near Murchison Falls, Uganda.

The popular concept of Empire – especially for those raised in the mother-country – is invariably romantic. British children were brought up to visualize Britain's vast imperial territories as their heritage. In cheap school atlases, flat splodges of red ink marked "our" possessions in Canada, Africa, India, the South Seas – territories which, ruled with a true and Christian benevolence, were the scenes of endless adventure stories set in exotic locations ranging from the trapper territory of northern Canada to uncharted African forests.

For many, the romance of Empire carried through into adult life. Whatever life was actually like in imperial lands, thousands at home invested service-men, colonial civil servants, or mere adventurers, bronzed and handsome from the "tropics," with the imperial halo.

This novelettish approach to the Empire became the inspiration not only for endless 19th- and early 20th-Century pulp fiction, but for cinema as well. Though such films were already dated – the cinema did not reach its full status as an art form with the coming of sound at the close of the 1920s, when the Empire was already disintegrating – many films on the old romantic imperial themes were made after 1930, for two good reasons. Firstly, legends make good stories (the imperial theme was only one of many adventure themes that were exploited by the new medium). And secondly, realism was expensive: films were (as they still are) extremely costly products to manufacture and to venture out on location in, say, Africa or India in order to obtain authentic backgrounds has always meant very high costs in transportation and the maintenance of technical units and actors. This kind of film, therefore, was likely to be rare, especially before the war; films in the 1930s, apart from Westerns, were largely made in the studios, both in Britain and the United States. Only with the growth of the documentary – considerably stimulated by the Second World War – was imperial romance to give way to imperial reality.

In the best-known feature films of the 1930s with British Empire backgrounds – *Trader Horn, Lives of a Bengal Lancer, Clive of India, Sanders of the River, Mutiny on the Bounty, Elephant Boy, Rhodes of Africa, Stanley and Livingstone, The Four Feathers, Gunga Din* – only two (*Rhodes of Africa* and *Stanley and Livingstone*) attempted to achieve a balance between the romantic legend of the storybooks and the facts of history.

Trader Horn was remarkable primarily for its presentation of wild life. The director, W.S. Van Dyke, moved his unit to their locations from a base near Murchison Falls in Uganda, and the wild life coverage, viewed today, is still strikingly successful. What is saddening about this film – as well as Van Dyke's next film, *Eskimo* – is the degree to which this kind of commercially sponsored location picture depended on the spectacle of hunting and killing magnificent animals in order to excite interest in these unfamiliar regions in the eyes of city-dwelling audiences. *Trader Horn* created its own standard image of the hunter on safari, proclaiming the moral superiority of arms over the animal kingdom. It was ironic that the wild animals became the principal performers, so long as they were shot by the camera and not by the gun.

Sudden death of men rather than of animals proved to have greater commercial success, a theme exploited in several films of the lives of officers and soldiers in the British Army serving in the "outposts" of Empire.

One of the earliest was John Ford's *The Lost Patrol* (1934); the film, shot like a Western in the desert of Yuma in the United States, dealt with the plight of a British patrol isolated in the Mesopotamian desert during the First World War. One by one Arab gunmen pick them off while they await relief in an oasis, leaving only the Sergeant (Victor McLaglen) to be rescued when the British cavalry finally arrive.

Dealing with a more recognizable part of the Empire was Henry Hathaway's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), with Gary Cooper and Franchot Tone, though once again an American hillside location had to pass muster for the Indian North-West Frontier and the picture inevitably became imbued with the style and technique of a Western. Loosely based on Yeats-Brown's best-seller of the period, *Bengal Lancer*, it concerned an autocratic colonel in the Lancers, whose son, a young officer, is captured and tortured into revealing important information. Two other officers, played by the stars, attempt to rescue him, contrary to orders; the disgrace to the regiment is finally averted, and the morale of Army discipline and good conduct heavily emphasized.

Clive of India (1935) was essentially a love-story, and not a single sequence of it was shot in India. Directed by Richard Boleslavski, with Ronald Colman and Loretta Young, it was a studio production showing the life of Clive and his rise to fame and fortune from being a counting-house clerk. *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) also went back to the 18th Century to dramatize, with Charles Laughton as Bligh and Clark Gable as Fletcher Christian, leader of the mutineers, this notorious episode of mutiny on the high seas which was to lead to the peopling of Pitcairn Island in the Pacific. The film exploited the brutalities of the period by showing the savage way in which seamen were disciplined.

In the mid-1930s there appeared the first imperial film directed by Zoltan Korda, brother of producer and director Alexander Korda; although a Hungarian, Zoltan Korda was to make more romantic films about the British Empire than any other director – he became virtually a specialist in imperial subjects. This sprang from his brother's devotion to Britain as the country which gave him the success he had failed to achieve in the United States. Korda, alone among British producers, saw the Empire as a continual source for romantic, spectacular films.

Of Zoltan Korda's films, *Sanders of the River* (1935), adapted from a story by Edgar Wallace, is the most embarrassing to view today. It was, however, to a considerable extent shot on location in Uganda and the Congo by the noted location cinematographer, Osmond Borrodaile. Korda took his time; he loved Africa, and worked on making the picture for 18 months. He was fascinated by African dancing and shot thousands of feet of film on this alone; it was this material and Zoltan's enthusiasm which finally persuaded Paul Robeson, the great American Negro singer, to play the part of Bosambo, while the large African cast involved members of the Acholi, Sesi, Tefik, Yoruba, Mendi and Kroo tribes. (The studio scenes made back in England, involved using Negro dockers from Cardiff.)

Leslie Banks played Sanders in this astonishing manifesto for the god-like administration of the White Man, and for the Black Man's happy readiness to take guidance from such a devoted representative of British justice. The lyrics sung by the natives thunder out the message, "Sandy the Wise, Sandy the Good," chanted to the plunge of paddle-blades in the river waters. And the Africans dance and dance. British audiences, untutored in the history of "their" Empire and caring nothing for its dated attitudes, flocked to see it.

Ronald Colman plays the title-role in *Clive of India*, a typical studio romance.

The film, perhaps because of its great success at the box-office, led to protests against its "jingoism" from the Commissioner for Nigeria in London. There were Communist demonstrations when it was screened in New York and Paul Robeson, a staunch Left-winger, felt he had to make a public apology for having appeared in it (though this did not stop him from appearing in other British 1930s films requiring an African in the cast, notably *Song of Freedom*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Jericho* and *The Proud Valley*).

Zoltan Korda went on to make *Elephant Boy* (1936), co-directed with Robert Flaherty, *The Drum* (1938) and *The Four Feathers* (1939). *Elephant Boy*, based on Kipling's *Toomai of the Elephants*, was shot in Mysore with Zoltan Korda acting as supervisor of the quite unnecessary story which was grafted on to what was basically a documentary in order to make it "box-office." So long as the film centres on Sabu, the elephant boy, on the mahouts and on their elephants – the parts directed by Flaherty – the results are magnificent. The highlight of Flaherty's work was to film – for the first time ever – an elephant dance. But Korda's subsidiary plot,

Victor McLaglen (centre) stars as one of *The Lost Patrol* stranded in the Mesopotamian desert during the First World War.

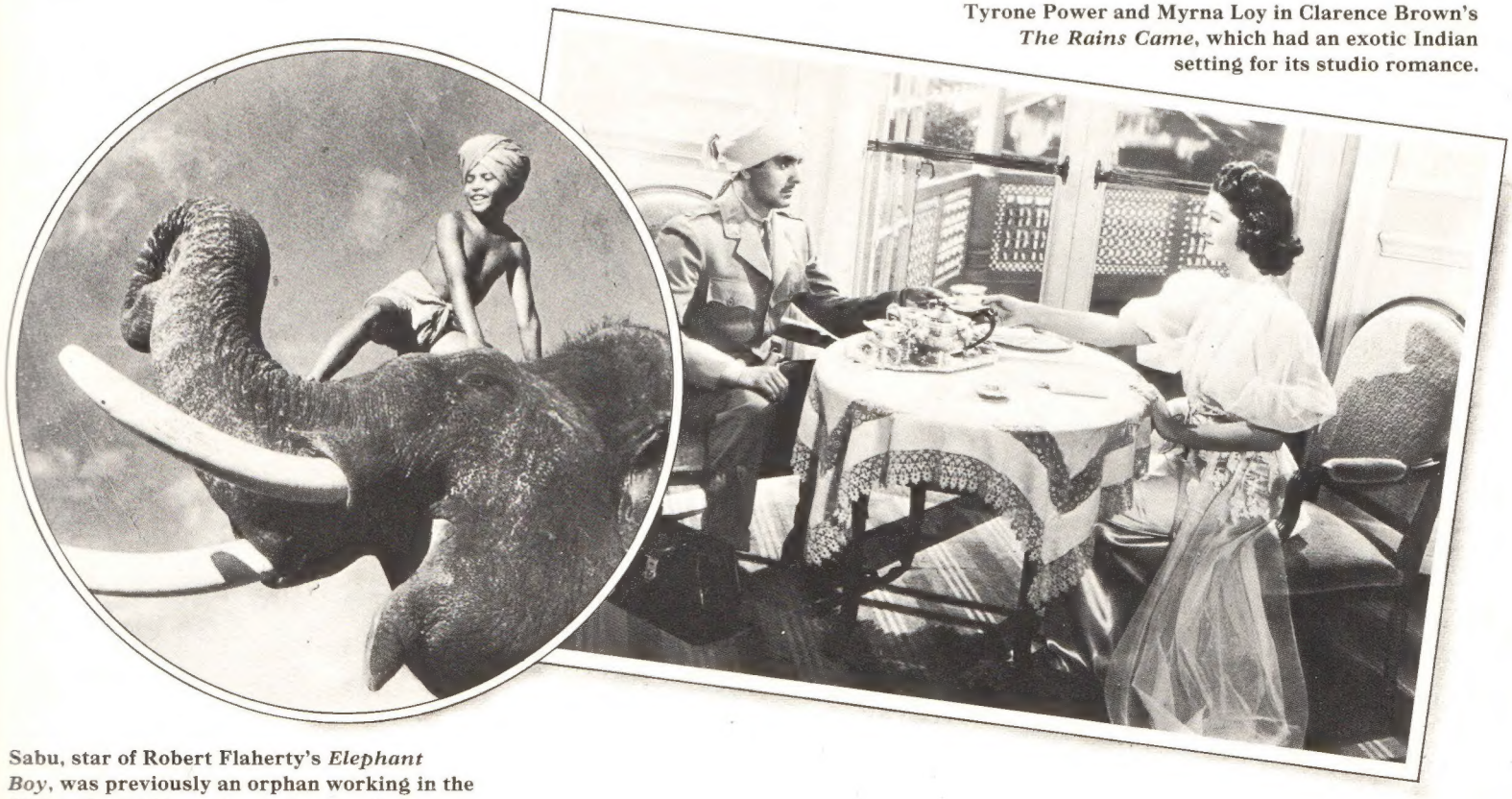
involving an elephant hunt and the efforts of a British cast filmed in England, is unconvincing.

The Drum (1938), which again featured Korda's new star, Sabu, was based on a story by the celebrated novelist, A.E.W. Mason; another melodrama set on the North-West Frontier of India, it involved an attempted revolt in an independent Indian state. Troops are called in to put this down. According to one responsible reviewer: "The English are represented as courageous, honest, clever and quietly cynical in their dealings with the natives," but they are also subject to fits of stupidity which land them in the kind of scrapes which prove useful to the action of the film. The Indians, on the other hand, led by Raymond Massey in brown-face, are callous and cruel, except for one Indian prince who had been educated in an English school. Although the *Left Review* regarded the film as "a sop to the decayed romanticism of the Empire's outposts," British administrators in some Indian cities, perhaps fearing that it might stimulate revolt, banned it.

The Four Feathers was also based on a well-known novel by A.E.W.Mason. This extravagant thriller, filmed in several versions by others before and since, concerned the adventures of Harry Faversham (John Clements) who, on the eve of Kitchener's campaign in the Sudan, resigns his commission in the Army. Held to be a coward, he receives four symbolic white feathers – one from his fiancée, who breaks their engagement, and the rest from fellow officers. In order to prove his courage, Faversham proceeds to disguise himself as a native and becomes a spy in the Khalifa's army, rescuing an English officer during combat; after other adventures in which he plays the Pimpernel and helps to serve the British cause, he is reinstated in British society and wins back his bride. The film, though allowing itself some currently fashionable anti-war sentiments, was very violent in certain scenes of torture and brutality, and in effect became pro-war, an attitude just gaining ground after attempts to appease Hitler had failed. The film censor of the day said to Korda: "The British nation should be grateful to you for producing such a film at such a time." Criticisms from the Left, which hastened to point out that this imperialist picture was backed by reactionary business interests in the form of the Prudential Assurance Company, were swept away by *The Four Feathers'* enormous commercial success and by the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Americans added two further productions in 1939 which helped maintain the old legend – George Stevens's *Gunga Din* and Clarence Brown's *The Rains Came*. The first, inspired by Kipling's poem, was another spectacular presentation of life as it was supposed to be lived on the North-West Frontier of India. Gunga Din (played by Sam Jaffe) is an Indian water-carrier who goes to the help of an adventurous sergeant captured by Thugs while exploring for hidden treasure; later Gunga Din is instrumental in saving the whole regiment from ambush at the cost of his life. Having proved his loyalty to the Raj, he wins the highest approval open to him by being awarded a posthumous V.C.

The Rains Came, based on a novel by Louis Bromfield, has a background of earthquake and cloudburst and involves the tortured love-affair between the wife of a "typical" English peer, played by Myrna Loy, and Rama Safti, an idealistic Hindu doctor (Tyrone Power). The emotional storm is reflected in the natural disaster, in which the peer dies, leaving his wife freer to pursue her romance. But inter-racial love can never, in imperial fiction, be allowed to succeed: the prob-



Tyrone Power and Myrna Loy in Clarence Brown's *The Rains Came*, which had an exotic Indian setting for its studio romance.

Sabu, star of Robert Flaherty's *Elephant Boy*, was previously an orphan working in the Maharajah of Mysore's elephant stables.

Spencer Tracy (left) and Cedric Hardwicke gave fine character performances in the title roles of *Stanley and Livingstone*.

lem is resolved by the death of the lady from plague caught while helping her lover nurse the sick.

Only two films, one British and one American, attempted in part to counter this succession of over-romantic images of Empire with something which approached a representation of history. These were *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) and *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939). These films aimed at authenticity on the level of popular biography, and in a difficult period when dramatic and emotional appeal was expressed almost entirely on the obvious level of the novelette, both were remarkable for the comparative sobriety of their treatment.

Rhodes of Africa, directed by an Austrian, Berthold Viertel and with the American Walter Huston playing the lead, in general sticks to a valid historical framework (Viertel said, "I tried to be truthful . . . to the ideas of history.")

Rhodes is given only six months to live by his friend and physician, Dr. Jameson. But he "has a dream," and "sets out to unite a Continent" in which rival interests are intriguing to claim areas in which diamond-mines are at stake. "Providence has placed in my hands the means of making my dream come true," Rhodes claims. Ten years later he is not only still alive but in control of the Kimberley mines, supplying 90 per cent of the world's diamonds, and dreaming of extending his influence over territories stretching from the Cape to Cairo. He meets with stern resistance from the Boer leader, Kruger (Oscar Homolka), who is opposed alike to Rhodes personally and to the British Crown. But Rhodes is already on trek into Matabeleland, where he wins concessions from the Chief, Lobengula; his search is now for gold, and his ambition is to construct a railway travelling to the north. A meeting between Rhodes and Kruger leads to stalemate: Kruger is conservative and suspicious of all this "progress," which he holds to be disadvantageous to the Boers. Rhodes becomes Prime Minister of the Cape, a position he realizes spells the "end of freedom," but it is Africa which has prolonged his life, and he therefore devotes himself to it. "Every breath I draw belongs to Africa," he says to an idealistic woman press correspondent, played by a youthful Peggy Ashcroft. But British businessmen whose rights in the Transvaal are denied by the Boers appeal to Rhodes for help. The inevitable confrontation of British and Boer interests troubles Rhodes, and after the disaster of the Jameson raid, when his friend invaded the Transvaal in a vain attempt to spark rebellion, he finally resigns both as Prime Minister and as director of the richest company in the world. He dies soon afterwards in 1902, aged only 49, unhappy that "so little is done."

The ruthless element in Rhodes and the twin driving forces in him of capitalism and imperialism, inspired and tempered by his fervent belief in both his God and his country, are inevitably softened in Walter Huston's image of the lonely, idealistic leader and visionary, his idealism compromised by the impetuosity of his friend Jameson. The controversial nature of Rhodes's complex motives are indicated to some extent through the reactions of the woman journalist who feels that, in spite of her initial admiration, she must finally attack him.

Rhodes of Africa received high praise from Alastair Cooke, then reviewing in London for *Sight and Sound*, as "not much below the first class of historical films . . . sensible and decent" and making "our more sober English tempo of living and thinking a positive quality of the film instead of a drag on a hurrying plot." He added, however, that "it balances the sympathy between the opposite sides not as fairly as Time and Providence will, but at any rate as evenly as you could expect from a protagonist."

Henry King's film, *Stanley and Livingstone* offered Hollywood an obvious hero in Henry M. Stanley, the American correspondent played in a brilliant, dignified performance by Spencer Tracy, who sets out to discover Dr. Livingstone (Cedric Hardwicke) in spite of the fact that the British believe him to be dead. Stanley persists in his expedition, and the film emphasizes the arduous conditions he has to overcome, the constant threat of death and fever, before he finds Livingstone and is converted to his ideas of dedication to the health, education and religious conversion of the Africans. When Stanley returns without Livingstone, the Royal Geographical Society refuses at first to believe him, a rejection which is dramatically reversed when Livingstone's dead body is carried to the coast by devoted natives, together with messages for Stanley. Stanley returns to Africa to continue the missionary work of the "lost" man, the discovery of whom had become the turning-point in his life.

While the greater public was gathering ideas of the Empire mainly from these theatrical films, others were being made which offered a documentary portrait of various territories in the British Empire and Commonwealth.

First among these was, undoubtedly the American Robert Flaherty's great film of the silent period, *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty has been involved with the Canadian north for years, since his mid-twenties. From 1910 onwards he had undertaken extensive prospecting expeditions in the Hudson Bay area. He had already made an earlier film of Eskimo life in Ungava and Baffinland, only to set fire accidentally to the negative with a cigarette after his return to New York. The second film was shot in 1920 and 1921 when Flaherty was in his mid-thirties. His base was the north-east coast of the Hudson Bay at Hopewell Sound, northern Ungava. He obtained the enthusiastic co-operation of Nanook the Eskimo and his family, who became dedicated performers in the film which Flaherty gradually assembled out of the routine of their domestic life and Nanook's constant hunting expeditions. Flaherty processed the film himself as it was shot and showed the results to his performers and their helpers, which spurred them to greater efforts.

He observed the Eskimos with the greatest sympathy, concentrating at length on those activities – hunting seal and walrus and building igloos out of ice against the coming of the night – that reflected their skills in combating the harshest environment in which mankind has chosen to live. Nyla, Nanook's wife, is shown chewing her husband's boots to soften them, and washing her baby with her own saliva.

Flaherty's feature-length documentary opened in New York at The Roxy with critical acclaim, but its commercial success really came from the long runs it enjoyed in London and Paris; subsequently, in 1947, a sound version was made with narration and music, which gave the film a further successful release.

With Robert Flaherty setting so high an initial standard in documentary studies of remote peoples in the Commonwealth, the next phase came with the series of British descriptive documentaries made for the Empire Marketing Board (E.M.B.) between 1929 and 1934. The E.M.B. had been established in 1926 to further the sale of British and Empire products and in 1929 John Grierson was appointed to set up a small film unit.

Grierson, a young Scottish academic, had recently returned from the United States, where he had studied public relations and the use of various media, including the film. As a result of Grierson's determination to use film for public relations, the British documentary movement of the 1930s was born. Among the new creations were many films of Britain, the Empire and the Commonwealth. With its restricted budget, many of the unit's subjects were shot in Britain, but among the documentaries made overseas were several by a particularly outstanding director, Basil Wright, including *Cargo from Jamaica*, *Windmill in Barbados*, and *Song of Ceylon*, a landmark in British documentary and a film still prized in Ceylon as well as elsewhere.

Song of Ceylon, made in 1935, contrasts the ancient, traditional Buddhist culture of Ceylon and modern, commercial developments. The occasional, half-murmured words of commentary were derived from a 17th-Century account of the island. As its name suggests, it is a musical creation. The film is symphonic both in length (40 minutes) and structure (it is divided into four "movements"); it concentrates wholly on atmosphere even in its handling of the voices of contemporary commerce; it is a meditation conceived by a Western mind inspired by the East, and it deliberately avoids comment on the island's political situation under the rule of the British.

The film begins with "The Buddha," which dwells on the legendary coming of the Buddha to Ceylon to free the people from superstition; the second part, "The Virgin Island," shows the culture and economy of Ceylon; the third, "The Voices of Commerce," contrasts ancient ways of crop-growing with modern methods. The last part, "The Apparel of the God," returns once again to the traditions of Buddhism.

The film's main theme – Buddhism – is stated with enormous effect in the first part. The annual mass pilgrimage winds its way up the steps to the summit of Adam's Peak, where Buddha is said to have implanted his last footprint before departing from Earth. The movement of the pilgrims climbing up the mountainside, the rhythm of the words spoken in praise of the prophet and the singing of the people are punctuated by ascending bell notes, the last startling a bird into flight which the camera follows over sunlit water. Another beautiful sequence, accompanied by Walter Leigh's evocative music, shows a lone Ceylonese worshipper offering a small gift of rice to the vast and imposing statue of the reclining Buddha ❧

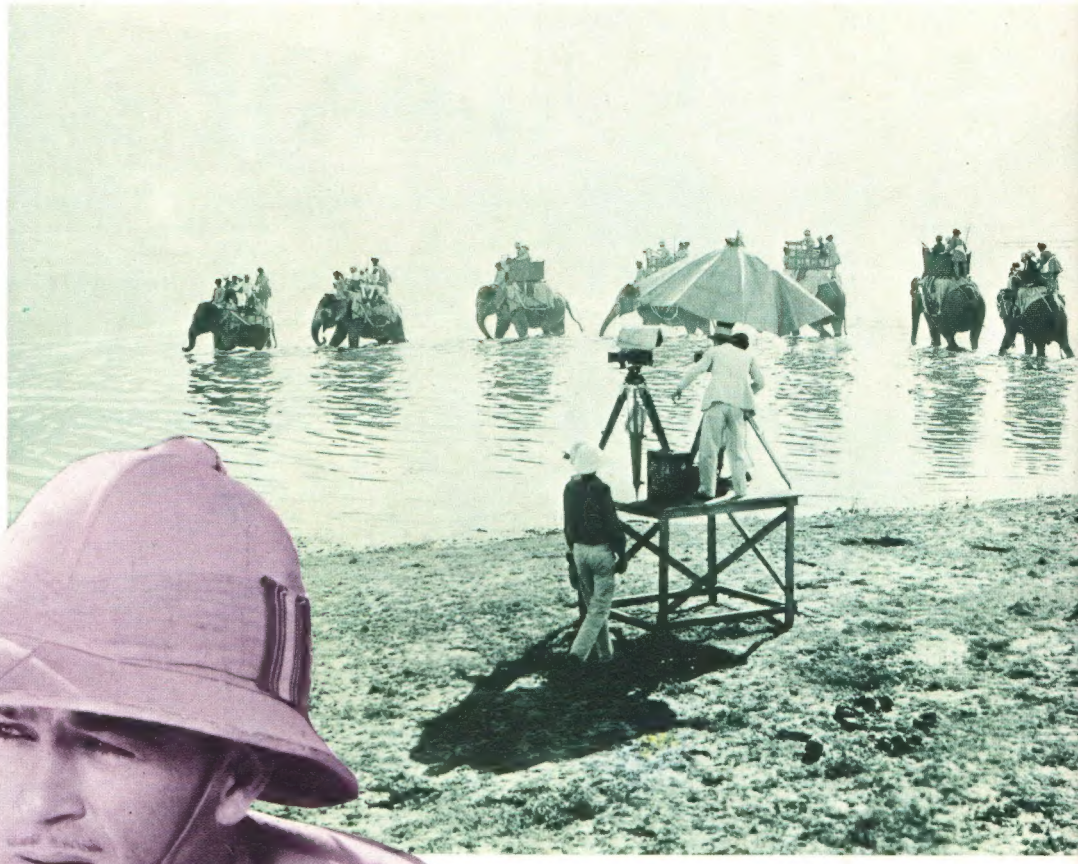
THE ROMANTIC IMAGE

Despite the growing realism of the 1930s cinema, millions still hungered for old stereotypes, to escape from memories of one war, fears of another, the rigours of the Depression. What did it matter that films like *Gunga Din*, *Bengal Lancer* and *Sanders of the River* ignored reality? Therein lay their strength.

Cary Grant (left), Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks Jnr. strike traditionally heroic poses in *Gunga Din*.

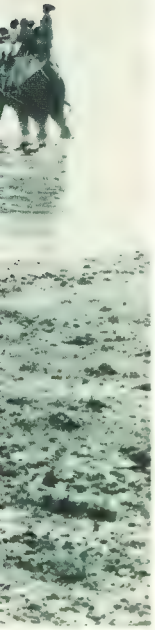
Honour Upheld

Henry Hathaway's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) was loosely based on a best-seller of the period, *Bengal Lancer* by Yeats–Brown. Its main subject was Army discipline. A young officer, son of an autocratic colonel in the Lancers, is captured by rebels on the North-West Frontier and tortured into revealing important information. Two other officers, played by Gary Cooper and Franchot Tone, attempt to rescue him, contrary to orders; disgrace to the regiment is finally averted, and the Army's inflexible standard of morale and good conduct emphasized.



The camera on location is shielded from the sun.

Gary Cooper, here aiding Jameson Thomas, stars as McGregor, an officer who resents the cold-blooded discipline imposed by his colonel on his men.



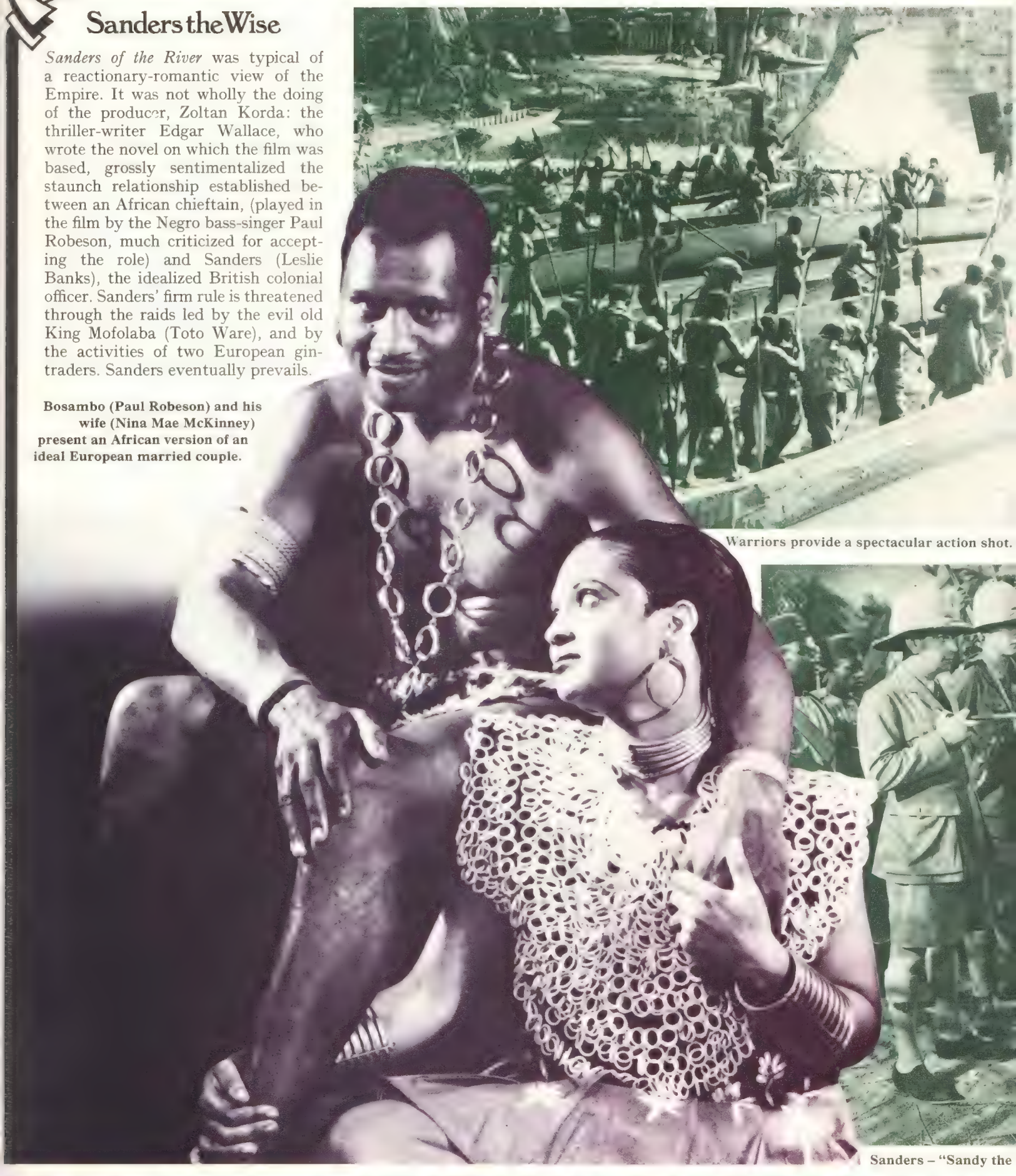
Enemy leaders, captors of the colonel's son, meet the colonel in the citadel of a friendly potentate.

Franchot Tone (right) backs McGregor.

In a dramatic confrontation, McGregor faces a captured enemy agent.

Sanders the Wise

Sanders of the River was typical of a reactionary-romantic view of the Empire. It was not wholly the doing of the producer, Zoltan Korda: the thriller-writer Edgar Wallace, who wrote the novel on which the film was based, grossly sentimentalized the staunch relationship established between an African chieftain, (played in the film by the Negro bass-singer Paul Robeson, much criticized for accepting the role) and Sanders (Leslie Banks), the idealized British colonial officer. Sanders' firm rule is threatened through the raids led by the evil old King Mofolaba (Toto Ware), and by the activities of two European gin-traders. Sanders eventually prevails.



Bosambo (Paul Robeson) and his wife (Nina Mae McKinney) present an African version of an ideal European married couple.

Warriors provide a spectacular action shot.

Sanders – "Sandy the

Smith (Eric Maturin) falls, shot by rebellious tribesmen.

Mofolaba epitomizes the conventional savage warrior.

Wise" – lords it paternally over admiring natives.

The old King, Mofolaba, confronts one of the gin traders.

A Better Man Than Tommy

Among the most famous of Rudyard Kipling's many Indian poems was *Gunga Din*, which in the voice of a British soldier celebrated the persistent courage and cheerfulness of the humble Indian water-carrier serving the thirsty soldiers in the heat of battle.

Of all them blackfaced crew
The finest man I knew
Was our regimental bhisti, Gunga Din . . .

The $2,000,000 film, *Gunga Din*, was inspired by this poem, but the story went far beyond that provided by Kipling. In the film the water-carrier is made responsible for saving the whole regiment at the cost of his own life. Loyalty to the Raj thus emerges as Gunga Din's main characteristic, whereas Kipling had expressed a genuine admiration for a man working under stress:

Though I've belted you and flayed you
By the living Gawd that made you,
You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

Thugs ambush the British regiment in a ravine.

The Sergeant (Cary Grant) shows Gunga Din (Sam Jaffe) the bugle with which the Indian later warns the British of ambush.

Highlanders stand to attention as the regimental bugler sounds the Last Post at sunset.

Cary Grant and Victor McLaglen, playing the captured sergeants, battle with rebels.

With their Indian troops, the three sergeants – Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen, and Douglas Fairbanks Jnr. (standing left) are attacked by Thugs in a North-West Frontier town.

Ethna Burroughs (Juen Duprez) confronts John Durrance (Ralph Richardson), fellow officer of her former fiancé, Harry Faversham. Faversham is later to save Durrance's life.

The Courageous Coward

The courage of officers and men in maintaining order throughout the Empire was a recurrent theme in novels and films. *The Four Feathers*, based on A.E.W.Mason's novel about the restoration of a man's lost reputation for courage, proved a popular story – it was filmed four times in all (these stills are from the 1938 version). The tale is set largely in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan on the eve of Kitchener's 1890s campaign to avenge Gordon's death a decade earlier at the hands of the Mahdi. Kitchener's expedition was against the Mahdi's successor, known as the Khalifa. The story concerns Harry Faversham, who appears to be a coward because he resigns his commission on the eve of Kitchener's campaign. His fiancée breaks off her engagement and gives him a white feather, symbol of cowardice, and three of Faversham's comrades follow suit. Faversham spends the rest of the film establishing his bravery by becoming a spy and mixing with the Khalifa's people.

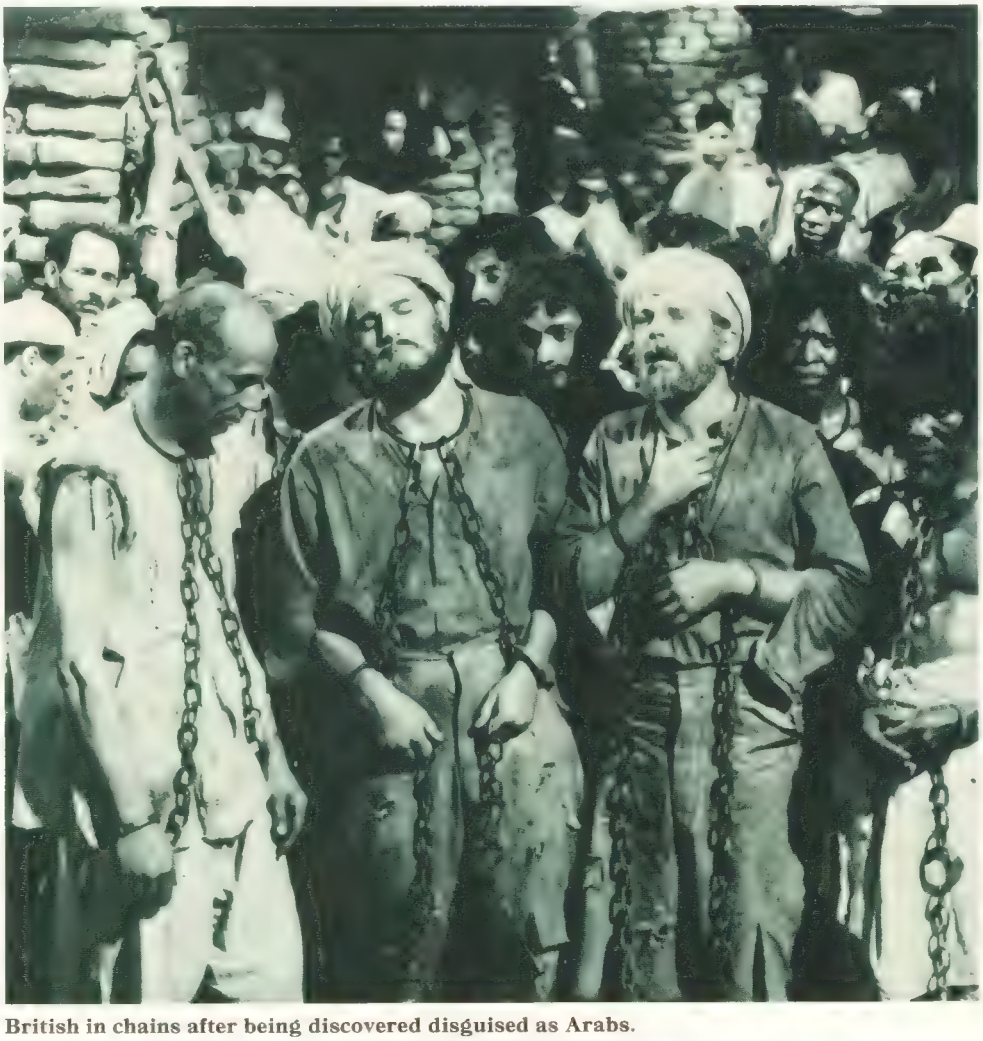
The story, already filmed twice – in 1921 and 1928 – was made yet again by Zoltan Korda in 1955 as *Storm over the Nile*.

The Khalifa's cavalry move off during the

An attack on one of the Khalifa's strongholds in the desert.

Hand-to-hand fighting between the British and the Khalifa's forces.

campaign that precedes the Battle of Omdurman.



British in chains after being discovered disguised as Arabs.

II. Return to Reality

In the wartime film, *49th Parallel*, Glynis Johns (foreground) plays a girl living in a German-Canadian Hutterite community.

The inter-war years saw the production of a particularly successful group of feature-length documentaries on exploration and mountaineering. *With Cobham to Kivu* (1932) recorded Sir Alan Cobham's voyage of discovery by air up the Nile and across the Blue Mountains to Lake Kivu. His purpose was to look for bases suitable for seaplanes, so that air transport could be developed. The result was a unique example of aerial reconnaissance, described by one critic as a "remarkable revelation of the startling effects in panoramic geography" which the camera achieved: S.R.Bonnett's photography captured views of the Pyramids, Luxor, the great dams, the cataracts, gorges and swamps down to the Victoria Nyanza.

Kamet Conquered (1932), directed and photographed by F.S.Smythe, contained fine material but was unfortunately cut back by the film trade before its release. However, Smythe's photography of river-valleys with their inhabitants, as well as the mountains themselves is preserved, together with the final climb to the summit in what Basil Wright described in a review as "literal slow motion," the climbers' limbs heavy in the rarefied atmosphere of Kamet's final heights. Smythe kept his camera going to the last, and managed to take the special lightweight cameras to the very summit (a feat that, 20 years later, Tom Stobart's team failed to match when working on *The Conquest of Everest*).

In 1934, S.R.Bonnett accompanied the Houston Mount Everest flight for *Wings over Everest*, achieving unique views of the peaks of Everest and Kanchenjunga in their setting along the Himalayan range.

The war years – especially when, after the fall of France in June, 1940, the British imperial association of dominions and colonies was for a year fighting alone – led to the making of many films which dealt with life in the individual territories of the Empire and their contribution to the war effort. A Colonial Film Unit was founded in 1939 and, until its closure by the British government as an economy measure in 1952, encouraged the development of film-making in the more important colonies by training film-makers and by providing the necessary equipment.

The war films were mostly utilitarian, concerned with local welfare, or else descriptive propaganda and documentary films dealing with the war itself. But where direct fighting centred on Empire territory remarkable combat documentaries emerged, most notably *Desert Victory*, *Tunisian Victory* and *Burma Victory*.

Though the best films presenting life in imperial territories were made after 1945, one unusual feature film – *49th Parallel* – was made during the war presenting an outstanding view of life in Canada. Produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, it was shot largely on location in Canada, and financed by the wartime British Ministry of Information. Among its many distinctions, it had a fine music score by Ralph Vaughan Williams and was edited by a man who was later to be one of Britain's most celebrated directors, David Lean. The film's many stars included Eric Portman, Leslie Howard, Raymond Massey and Laurence Olivier.

It contrasted the Nazi mentality with the outlook of communities and individuals with an established democratic tradition behind them, a tradition that underlies their dramatic dissimilarities. A Nazi U-boat is sunk by air attack in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the survivors of the crew, led by their captain (Eric Portman) penetrate the Canadian hinterland as fugitives. They discover on one occasion a German Hutterite community of refugees from Nazism, and on another the survivors, reduced now to two men, turn a mild-seeming intellectual into a tornado of vengeance when they destroy his life's work. This Canadian odyssey became a voyage of exploration into human experience, a revelation of the various needs which have gone to the creation of communities in the New World.

Wartime Australia was represented by a feature film made shortly after the war by Harry Watt – *The Overlanders* (1946). Originally one of Grierson's documentary directors in Britain, Watt was sent to Australia to discover a war subject indigenous to the country. He sent back this true story of a great cattle trek over half Australia, north to south, when livestock in the north appeared to be threatened by a possible invasion from Japan. The result was an unusual kind of Australian "Western" with a cast of Australians driving their great herd (purchased for the film) over varied terrain of mountain and bushland.

The immediate post-war years saw the greatest output of productions – both of

documentaries and features – with an Empire and Commonwealth background. The colonial territories during the last years of British rule were the subject of what became in effect valedictory studies of great beauty, descriptive documentaries made mainly by British directors. Many were created as a result of enlightened industrial or official sponsorship, such as that of Shell, the National Film Board of Canada, the Indian Government Film Department and the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit. These films – notably *Cyprus is an Island*, *A String of Beads*, *Three Dawns to Sydney*, *Daybreak in Udi*, *Voices of Malaya*, *El Dorado* and *The Rival World* – avoided, at times almost pointedly, the controversies surrounding how and when these territories were to achieve their independence; rather they concentrated on the tempo of social and family life, husbandry and industry, where this existed.

A String of Beads (1947) has a particularly fascinating history. It was shot in Assam among the tea-plantation workers, concentrating on a single youthful couple. The problem of casting two performers with good looks suitable for close photography was described afterwards by the director, Ralph Keene:

"In our film story the boy and girl get married, and later have a child. At once we discovered that no unmarried boy or girl would go through the wedding ceremony in make-believe; we would have to find a pair who were really getting married about that time . . . or use an already married couple. And the baby would have to be their own baby or a borrowed one *of the same caste*. . . . When it came to selecting the families and houses, other complications arose. They must all be of the same caste as the principals or they would not be able to take part in the wedding feast together; nor could they prepare or eat food in any house but one belonging to a member of their own caste. . . . Every scene these people enacted for the film they had to do as if it were real. They could not simulate an emotion. If we wanted Ramdas to look startled, we had to startle him. If drunkenness was required, they had to be made drunk. There is a characteristic gesture the women made, hiding their faces in the folds of their saris. I tried many times to get Mangri to do this for the film, but she could not – until I asked our *babu* to say something that would really embarrass her. Then she did it beautifully."

Daybreak in Udi (1949) was concerned with education and social welfare in a village in the Eastern Province of Nigeria. The film recorded how local farmers undertook practical welfare work for their own community, constructing their own water-supply system, erecting schools, hospitals and building roads, all on the basis of spare-time voluntary labour. *Three Dawns to Sydney* portrayed selected communities over which an aircraft passed during its three-day flight from London to Sydney, and *El Dorado* showed something of the rich resources which lie in the hinterland of what was then British Guiana. The tone of all these films was romantic, even lyrical, mostly supported by atmospheric musical scores.

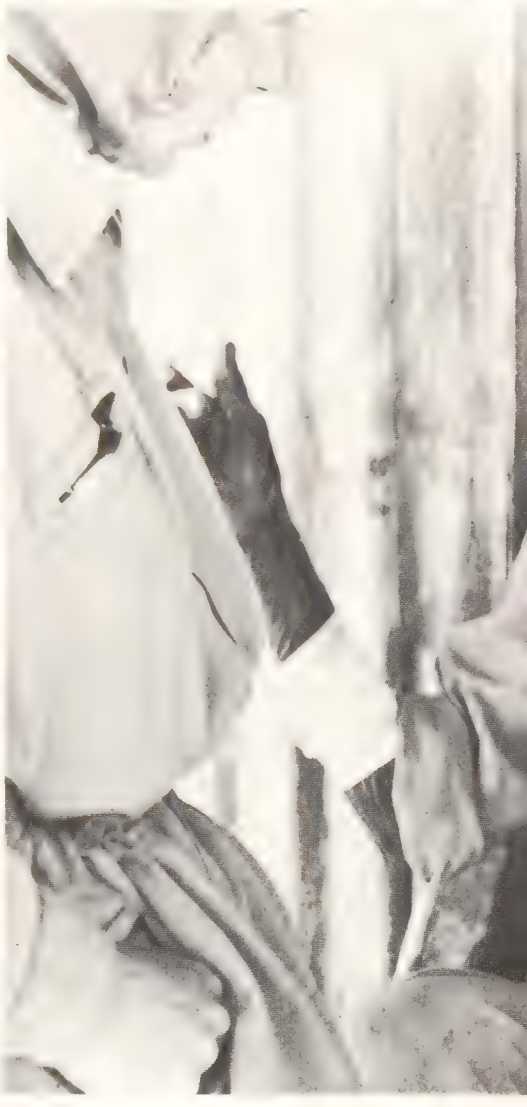
On the other hand, *The Rival World*, one of the most celebrated of the Shell Film Unit's productions, was severely practical. It made spectacular use of man's

Two members of a drovers' team (left) bog down in Harry Watt's film *The Overlanders*, which reconstructed a wartime cattle trek (right) over desert, swamp and mountains.

THE AUTHENTIC VIEW

Though documentaries, like features, can present romanticized propaganda, the Empire has inspired a mass of truthful interpretations of life and conditions in imperial territories. The main stimuli have been great events – especially the Second World War – and the increasing independence of imperial areas, notably Australia, which led to a corresponding ambition of local producers to record their own environment.

In Terry Bishop's officially sponsored documentary, *Daybreak in Udi*, the villagers of Udi, in Eastern Nigeria, celebrate their completion of a maternity home with a dance,



Old Joe, the aboriginal rain-maker of *Back of Beyond*, is one of the few people who lived in isolation along the Birdsville Track.

Tom Kruse's truck in *Back of Beyond* plies one of the world's loneliest transport routes, the 330-mile Birdsville track through the desert of central Australia.

Army transports rumble along in *Desert Victory*, the film made by the British Service Film Units to commemorate the Eighth Army's 1942 victory at Alamein.

Montgomery shared the limelight in *Desert Victory* with Alexander. Together, they led a 1,400-mile march through desert to Tripoli.

war against the insects, especially the locust, in East Africa. Insects outnumber man by 50 million to one, and the film shows the untold damage these pests do to the crops and, as in the case of malaria, to the health of the people. (Shell has also produced other regional films in different parts of the Commonwealth, including sponsorship of John Heyer's descriptive documentary made in Australia, *The Back of Beyond* (1954), a study of the life of isolated individuals and communities along the Birdsville Track across the wastes of central Australia.)

Of those Commonwealth areas that have sponsored films, Canada has been especially prolific: she has gone some way towards depicting her history in such documentaries as *From Cartier to Confederation* (1941) and *French Canada 1534–1848* (1950), both told largely through contemporary prints and pictures, *Family Tree* (1949), the whole history of Canadian settlement and evolution told in cartoon form, *Wolfe and Montcalm* (1957), a dramatic re-enactment of events leading to the fall of Quebec, and *City of Gold* (1957), on the Yukon gold-rush.

Of those directors whose careers were helped by official sponsorship, perhaps the best known is Harry Watt. After *The Overlanders*, Watt remained in Australia to make a second feature film, *Eureka Stockade* (1947) for London's Ealing Studios. Like Zoltan Korda, Watt became for a period something of a specialist in Commonwealth and Empire film-making, though with a very different approach from the romanticism of Korda.

The film industry in Australia was in poor shape, apart from government-sponsored documentary. A few determined men had been endeavouring to make indigenous feature films – notably Charles Chauvel, whose *40,000 Horsemen* (1941), concerning the Australian cavalry in Palestine during the First World War, was to date the outstanding all-Australian production. *Eureka Stockade* was less successful than *The Overlanders*, but it at least put on the screen a vigorous episode from Australian history, the armed rebellion of Ballarat miners in 1854 against official repression. Again there were difficulties of production. Harry Watt – wrote of "the bad weather, which turned out to be the worst for ninety-two years. We had by this time an enormous unit with 250 soldiers and 100 technicians and actors in one camp. And we only had five shooting days in the first five weeks! We took over a complete valley, and built in it a replica of Ballarat in 1854, with a main village street and more than 600 tents scattered round the diggings.... We had to transport the complete unit sixteen miles each way in buses every day, and our roads became so bad that we had to walk the last two miles.... On many days it was well over 100 degrees in the shade, and the period costumes were terribly trying. But worst of all, a strike deprived us of beer for eight weeks! This nearly caused a mutiny!"

Watt, still working for Ealing, then moved on to Africa, to make *Where No Vultures Fly* (1951) and *West of Zanzibar* (1953). The first deals with the preservation of wildlife in East Africa, and the struggle of a game warden to establish a National Park against every kind of local opposition. The colour photography of wildlife was by Paul Beeson, and the action included attacks by a lioness, a leopard and a charging rhino. *West of Zanzibar*, also photographed in colour by Paul Beeson, was a sequel, dealing with social problems facing a tribe forced to seek new land through soil erosion. They become involved temporarily in the evils

of ivory smuggling until they are rescued by the same public-spirited game warden as appeared in *Where No Vultures Fly* and induced to resume their past, peaceful existence. The picture of life in Mombasa and Zanzibar offered the best element in a film which proved weaker than its predecessor.

Africa, where traditionally dramatic settings combined with new political tensions, was now fast becoming a focus for film-makers. A particularly original approach to an African subject was Thorold Dickinson's early post-war attempt to reconstruct Africa in the studios at Denham, near London, for *Men of Two Worlds* (1946). The central character was an African composer, trained in Britain, who returns to his country only to become subject to the evil influences of a hostile witch-doctor, who is all-powerful in his tribe. The film symbolized a man torn between two wholly divergent levels of culture and trying to free himself from superstitions deep in his nature.

The African Mau Mau terrorist movement in Kenya dominated Brian Desmond Hurst's film, *Simba* (1955), but the political aspirations of both the Europeans and the Africans were too vaguely, too politely presented to have much impact. The intransigence of many white settlers and the blood-stained bestiality of African extremism were suggested rather than faced outright.

Other feature films with African settings and an imperial background included *The African Queen* (John Huston, 1951), *Zulu* (Cy Enfield, 1963), set in Natal of 1879, and *Khartoum* (Basil Dearden, 1966). *The African Queen*, though an excellent film, with splendidly humane characterization by Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn, was more concerned with the presentation of individual experience than with the African background. *Zulu*, however, reconstructed history: it showed the attack during the Zulu War by some 4,000 Zulus on Rorke's Drift mission station and hospital, ending with the Zulu retreating, chanting a song of salute (an invention, but one in keeping with the event) to their gallant opponents, who had numbered at the start barely 100 men fit to fight. The battle itself – a momentous encounter that saved Natal from invasion – was superbly organized and impressive; the Zulu war-song is at one stage countered by Welsh soldiers singing "Men of Harlech," a strangely moving moment. Although this film is ostensibly anti-war, the careful presentation of both the strategy and the spectacle of war is essential to its interest.

Khartoum was another historical reconstruction in the tradition of *Rhodes of Africa* and *Stanley and Livingstone*. The film retells the story of Gordon's death in Khartoum in January, 1885, when, cut off from British aid, he was overwhelmed by the Mahdi's dervishes. It was scripted by the noted American dramatist, Robert Ardrey, and so has some worthy dialogue. The film required some three years' preliminary research and was made with the approval of the Sudanese government and the descendants of the Mahdi. Laurence Olivier, who played the Mahdi, worked on location in the Cairo desert with some 2,000 extras, horses and camels. Charlton Heston's interpretation of Gordon was based on considerable historical research, but the Mahdi is less convincing as a character; he is even made to meet Gordon, which, as everyone hastened to point out, was the film's principal deviation from history. Gordon had wanted to meet the Mahdi – they exchanged letters – but this never took place.

In *Men of Two Worlds* the Western-educated African pianist (Robert Adams) plays at a London concert (left). When he returns to his tribe (right) he antagonizes a witch-doctor and is bewitched by him (below).

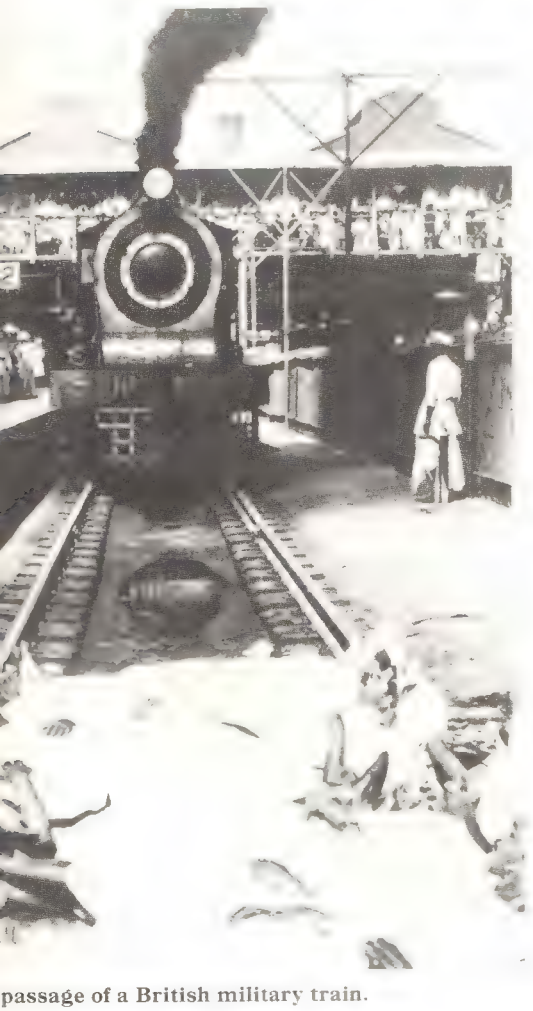
THE END OF THE RAJ

The Anglo-Indian girl Victoria Jones (Ava Gardner), torn between conflicting loyalties, is attracted against her will to the tough Colonel Savage (Stewart Granger).

The end of British rule in India and the ensuing sectarian violence provided superb film material, powerfully screened in *Bhowani Junction* and *Nine Hours to Rama*. In *Bhowani Junction* (these pages), adapted from a novel by John Masters, the sexual adventures of an Anglo-Indian girl (Ava Gardner) are set against events – Left-wing terrorist activities at a railway-junction – that dramatize the end of the Raj. *Nine Hours to Rama* (following pages) reconstructs the assassination of Gandhi.

Patriots lie on the tracks in order to impede the

Bhowani Junction is an important railway centre, chosen as the focus for demonstration and attack by Indian patriots.



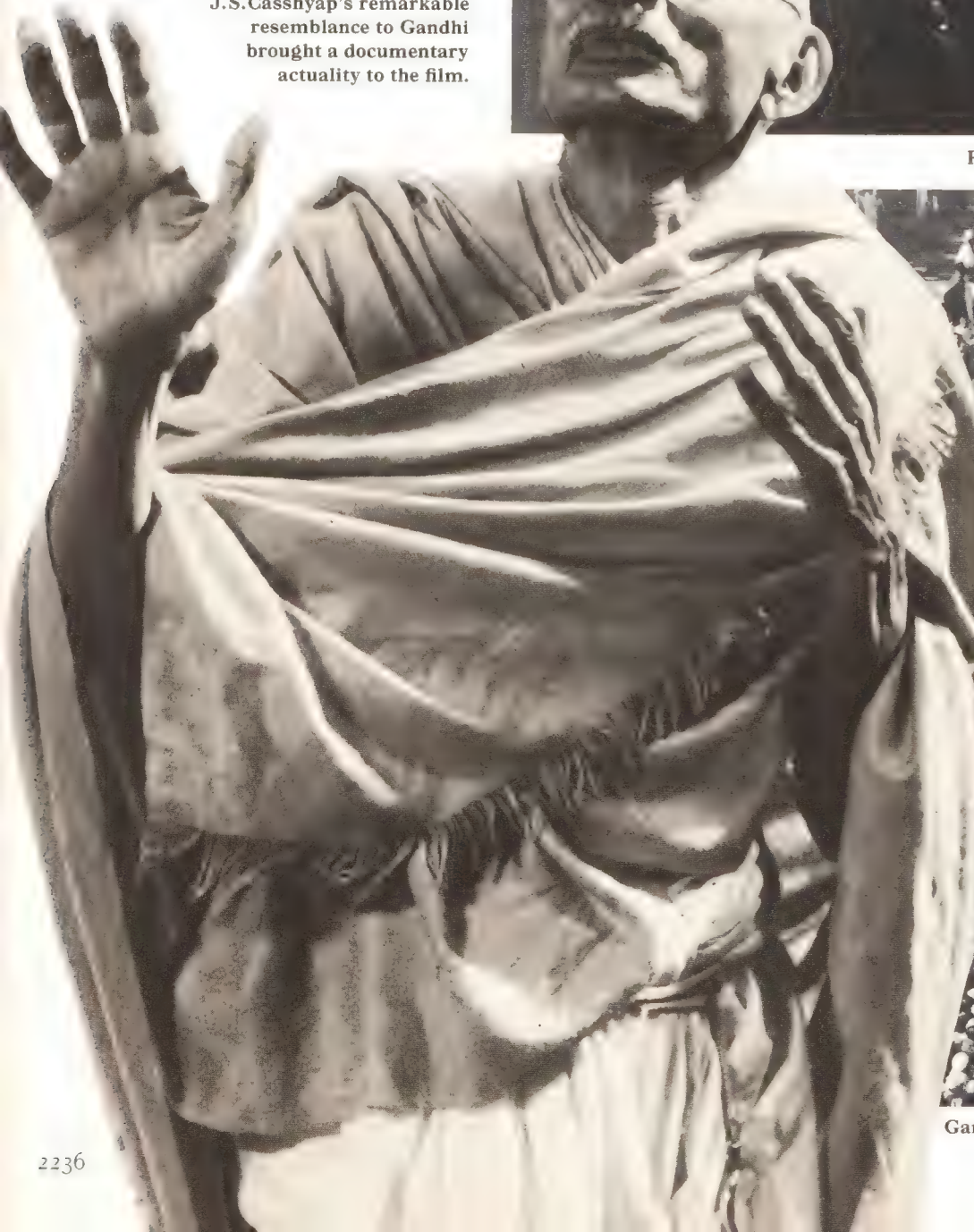
passage of a British military train.

An ammunition train is wrecked by patriots when opposition escalates into violence.

The Mahatma's Murder

Nine Hours to Rama dramatized the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. This British film was produced and directed by the American, Mark Robson, best known for such films as *Peyton Place*, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, and *Valley of the Dolls*, and it was conceived largely as a thriller.

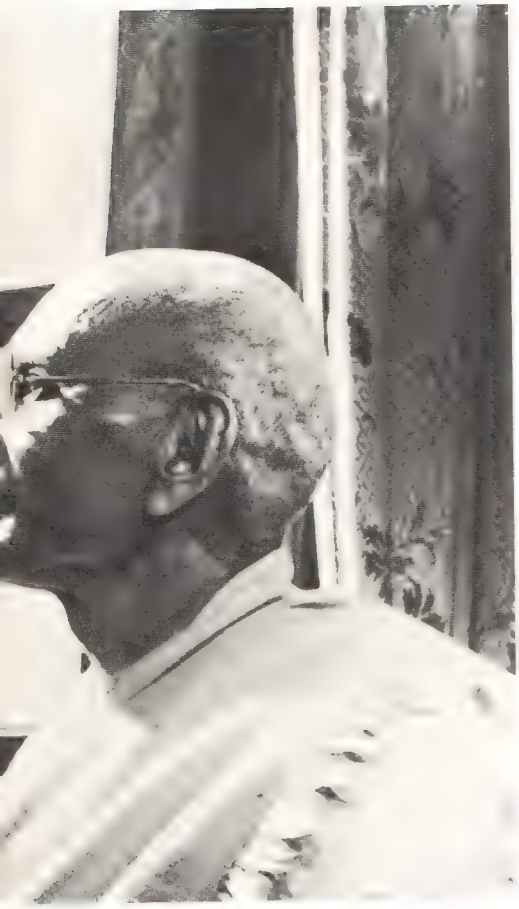
As it happened, the film was saved as a serious portrayal of events by the restrained and sensitive performance of J.S.Casshyap, a schoolmaster with no previous experience as an actor, who was chosen to play Gandhi because of his stunning resemblance to the Mahatma. Supporting Indian roles were played by such well-known Western actors as José Ferrer, Harry Andrews and Robert Morley, and Western actresses played the two principal Indian girls.



J.S.Casshyap's remarkable resemblance to Gandhi brought a documentary actuality to the film.

Robert Morley was one of the many Western actors

Gandhi's funeral procession, attended by vast masses



who took the parts of Indians.

Gandhi confronts his assassin, Naturam Godse (Horst Buchholz in one of his first film roles).

of his followers, approaches the cremation area.

Surrounded by unprecedented scenes of mass mourning, Gandhi's body is burnt on the funeral pyr

III. The Imperial Epic

The British presence in the Middle East was represented in one of the finest, and also one of the most controversial, films to have been made about British imperial history, David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). It took courage to make: it had an enormous budget to create the four hours of spectacular action; and its central interest lay in the complex character of Lawrence – a man of heroic stature who none the less had certain negative and even repellent qualities. In the space of a few months he rose from obscurity to become a national hero, only to retire again in 1918 in a state of bitter disillusion and indulge in an obsessive pursuit of anonymity, a curious form of inverted vanity.

The result was visually brilliant. The film contains some of the most beautiful photography to be seen on the British screen. The sweeping, empty landscape of Jordania is captured in its untouched, naked splendour, its infinite layers of sand laid flat by the wind or blown into contours which turn hills into declivities of golden-brown or leave mountainous outcrops of rock standing stark and magnificent under the harsh sun.

But mere pictures were never allowed to glut the screen for their own sake. The landscape is intimately bound up with Lawrence's character. This clean, virginal territory had to be captured in such stunning terms in order to make clear why it had a peculiar attraction for Lawrence's inhibited soul: here, the film suggests, he could reach fulfilment as a leader, fulfilment that was denied him at home and in the society of his own people.

He does so by facing and mastering the desert, which becomes almost a character in its own right. Sometimes it appears a lonely wasteland, like the Arctic, in which human figures become insignificant specks, dwarfed by open plains and rocks; sometimes a haunted place where solitary men on camels grow as mirages into quivering, tenuous giants. Desert and sun are the extinguishers of life and Lawrence constantly challenges them until he becomes for the Arabs a divinely appointed leader of Homeric proportions.

Another controversial film was *Exodus* (1960), Otto Preminger's film based on Leon Uris's novel about the final, most difficult days of the Mandate in Palestine which Britain had undertaken after the First World War. It dealt with the tragic history of Jewish immigration after 1946, when ship after ship tried to run the blockade established by the British to regulate Jewish immigration in response to Arab pressure. It also involved the terrorist Irgun movement, and the conflict between Arab and Jew once the British had left. In tracing the difficulties faced by the Jewish immigrants, the film romanticizes the Zionist cause, even when certain sections within it were prepared to practise terrorism.

The most significant event of post-war imperial history was the granting of independence to India in August, 1947. Nevertheless, the Indian film industry did little to celebrate this. The cinema in India was – and is – largely a medium of escape. Only a handful of films, pioneered by socially and politically conscious directors such as K.A.Abbas and Bimal Roy, attempted a realistic portrayal of Indian life. Abbas's *Children of the Earth* (1949) tells the story of a peasant family's debts and dispossession. His *The Lost Child* (1954), shows Bombay society as discovered by a child of seven. Bimal Roy produced social studies of the evils of poverty and the caste system in *Two Acres of Land* (1953) and *Sujata* (1959).

India has, however, produced one filmmaker of enormous stature: Satyajit Ray. Ray's sensitive films of Bengali life on many levels of poverty and wealth seldom deal with the Raj itself, but in one he deliberately accepted this challenge, and met it with remarkable balance and dis-

A camera-team shoots a scene in Otto Preminger's film *Exodus*, in which a ship brings illegal immigrants to Palestine.

Peter O'Toole gave a powerful, brilliant interpretation of the character of Lawrence as conceived in the film.

cretion. This was *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), his biographical documentary about the great Bengali poet who was, during the final year of his life, Ray's teacher at the college he founded, Santiniketan. Using newsreels from the archives, still pictures and filmed documentation, as well as carefully re-enacted episodes in Tagore's early life, Ray produced a feature-length historical film which includes a study of Anglo-Indian relations, both good and bad, going back to the mid-19th Century. A neglected work, overshadowed by Ray's better-known screen dramas, *Rabindranath Tagore* is one of the rare Indian films to make a direct statement about Anglo-Indian relationships, a statement at once positive, appreciative and also in due place critical.

Though several Western directors have used Indian settings, they have often done so to continue the traditional, romantic view of Anglo-Indian history. Laslo Benedek's *Bengal Rifles* (1954) is an American period thriller about honour lost through misunderstanding among the officer class stationed in India, with a native rebellion suppressed in high style by Rock Hudson. J. Lee Thompson's *North-West Frontier* (1959) features the 1905 rebellion of Muslim tribesmen, another conventionally heroic tale of action with Kenneth More as the dashing officer. *The Wind Cannot Read* (Ralph Thomas, 1958) provides pleasant Indian locations, including Delhi and the Taj Mahal, for a wartime romance between an English flight lieutenant and a Japanese refugee. George Cukor's film, *Bhowani Junction* (1955), tells the story of the sexual adventures of an Anglo-Indian girl (Ava Gardner) against the decaying authority of the British in 1947, but the complications of history are undigested, and its violence used for background in an exotic setting.

More significant as a Western attempt to deal with recent Indian history was *Nine Hours to Rama* (1963), an American-sponsored production which reconstructed the events which led to the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. The film offers little insight into history in that events are seen from the point of view of the neurotic young assassin, Naturam Godse; moreover, this motivation is treated more in melodramatic than in psychological terms. But the film is worth seeing for the impressive impersonation of Gandhi by J.S.Casshyap, a non-professional performer; the rest of the cast were a peculiar mixture of Indian players and Western actors representing Indians. The assassin himself was played by the German actor, Horst Buchholz.

The film which came nearest to capturing something of the atmosphere of the aftermath of the Raj was made by an independent American director, James Ivory. This was *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), a delicately affectionate and amused tribute to an English stock actor and his family who have lingered on after Independence, playing Shakespeare with a small Anglo-Indian touring company to ever-dwindling audiences. Geoffrey Kendall, who played this Shakespearean

The young lieutenant (Michael Caine) fights an African warrior hand-to-hand in *Zulu*, a film that honoured the courage of both sides.

actor, was in fact still doing this very thing in India, and his daughter, Felicity Kendall, who in the film falls in love with a wealthy Indian boy but leaves for England when he decides he could never marry an actress, emigrated herself to England, where she has become established and successful.

The changing post-war Empire inspired other films of high entertainment value, but of only marginal interest to the historian. In 1952 Ealing Studios released a film version of the play, *His Excellency*, directed by Robert Hamer, the story of a dockers' union leader who is appointed by a British socialist government to be Governor of an unnamed Mediterranean island which is still a British possession. This is plainly Malta. Faced with the duty of dealing with a disturbance among the dockyard workers on the island, the new Governor (Eric Portman) is forced to do the very thing he vowed he would never do: call out troops to quell an industrial dispute. Later, he manages to bring the dockers round to his way of thinking by using the same style of soapbox oratory that he had once employed on Tyneside.

Guns at Batasi (John Guillermin, 1964), is the story of British soldiers who remain in an African state after independence to serve in its new army, mixed white and black. The film, which leans to melodrama rather than actuality, shows British officers and N.C.O.s facing up to a rebellion and change of government in this state under African rule.

It remained for Zoltan Korda to make the most sensitive British contribution to the aftermath of Empire, *Cry the Beloved Country* (1951), adapted by Alan Paton from his novel set in Natal. Shot largely in South Africa when it was still a member of the British Commonwealth, this most moving film was fearless in its exposure of the racial tensions which were soon to become so marked. A Negro preacher, Kumalo, living in the hills of Natal has to face the moral corruption and downfall of his sister, a prostitute, and his son, Absolom, a thief, after they have gone to Johannesburg, a centre for racial strife. Absolom during an act of theft murders a white man, the son of a South African farmer, who has in fact set out to help the cause of the African. Absolom is condemned to death, but the two fathers, black and white, become united through bereavement and mutual understanding of the racial tragedy of the society in which they live.

The cinema has so far made only limited use of the great wealth of episodes, stories, races and locations which the history of the British Empire has to offer, covering as it does some four centuries in time and territories which once circled the Earth. Few films, for example, have gone back to the origins of British colonization. *Plymouth Adventure* (1952), directed by Clarence Brown and starring Spencer Tracy as Christopher Jones, captain of the *Mayflower*, was an attempt to "humanize" the Pilgrim Fathers, and show that some among them, notably the captain, could fall in love like the characters in any Hollywood romance. Historical characters (William Bradford, Myles Standish, William Brewster) are introduced alongside the fictional – all in all scarcely an adequate way to represent one of the most significant expeditions. not only in British colonial history but in the history of the world. There are others that deal with early days – *The Last of the Mohicans, Daniel Boone, La Fayette* – but all are unrealistic spectaculars.

Perhaps the fuller projection of the story of the British Empire is an enterprise television will gradually take over, as it has already done, for example, in a recent series, *The Search for the Nile*, which retraces the careers of several of the great Victorian explorers. Certainly the scale of many of the most absorbing historical episodes suggest the scope of a series rather than the two-hour action of a single film.

The cinema, too, because of its need for international patronage, has obviously been too shy of offending susceptibilities. Why is there so little on the screen about the American War of Independence, the slave trade, the convict voyages and settlements out of which Australia grew? Television is still to some extent free from such restrictions. The opportunities should be taken while the medium is still in a position to treat them without falsification or romantic distortion.

General Charles Gordon (Charlton Heston) faces the Mahdi's dervishes in *Khartoum*. This scene, which reconstructs a famous contemporary painting of the event, unites both drama and historical fact.

Piper and Bandsman, Highland Light Infantry (71st Foot), 1910